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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 SUVA 000061

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SUBJECT: TONGA REMAINS FRACTURED FROM 11/16 RIOT

REF: A. 06 SUVA 500

[1](#)B. 06 SUVA 504

[1](#)C. 06 SUVA 507

[1](#)D. 06 SUVA 508

[1](#)E. 06 SUVA 517

[1](#)F. 06 SUVA 530

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) This telegram sketches factors that appear to have contributed to the riot of Nov. 16 in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, an event that devastated the central business district (CBD) and has left deep scars on every Tongan's psyche. Certainly on Nov. 16, Tonga's political process was at center stage, with Prime Minister Sevele seeking to harness the pace and extent of reform, probably in consultation with the Palace, and with pro-democracy activists on the other side striving to pile on people-power pressure to up the pace and ensure a rapid and definitively democratic outcome. Some allege power jealousies within the pro-democracy movement played a part. Others allege a small-business group's unhappiness with Government policies played a significant role. Most likely, the instigators, whatever their motives, did not intend the degree of devastation that occurred. Police were ineffectual. Armed Tonga Defense Service (TDS) troops eventually restored order. Two months later, every Tongan remains shaken, and the CBD, now cleared of rubble, is an empty zone of concrete slabs. Septel will discuss issues at play as Tonga attempts to punish wrongdoers, rebuild the economy, and decide on political reforms. End summary.

"16/11" - a day of devastation for Tonga

[1](#)2. (U) Reftels reported on the riot that devastated Nuku'alofa, the capital of Tonga, on Nov. 16, 2006. Amb. Dinger visited Jan. 19-21 to gauge the current state of play. Most everyone uses the shorthand "16/11" to refer to the day, and Tongans consider the riot to be their equivalent of "9/11" in the U.S. The areas of the CBD destroyed that day are still sealed off by armed TDS troops. Nearly all the burned-out buildings have been removed, leaving a vast open space of whitened-concrete slabs spread across approximately six square blocks. The government buildings that suffered mob damage to windows and doors have been repaired. Farther from the center, isolated buildings that were torched are gone, with vacant lots remaining.

All sides remain angry

[1](#)3. (C) While the ruined buildings are removed, deep scars

remain within psyches. Almost everyone is angry. Government ministers and supporters remain deeply offended that rioters embarrassed Tonga to the world, destroyed many businesses and jobs, and have not been contrite. Pro-democracy supporters remain deeply frustrated by royal and government failure, thus far, to enact far-reaching political reforms and by what they see as a heavy-handed, military-oriented response to the riot.

Prosecutions pending

¶4. (C) The Government's efforts to determine who instigated the riot and press charges are well under way. Up to a thousand people have been detained by the police and TDS under emergency powers. Most have been subsequently released. Court cases are beginning. The Attorney General acknowledges a need to divert most cases to alternative resolution processes, including a youth diversion program. The AG expects about a hundred cases actually to go to trial.

Evidence in many cases will be video, including cell-phone video, of riot scenes, plus testimony of some participants. Extra prosecutors, defense lawyers, and judges are being recruited from Australia and New Zealand.

Pro-democracy MPs under fire

¶5. (C) The Government expects all seven pro-democracy-oriented Peoples Representatives to Parliament to be indicted on sedition and other charges. Thus far, two have been taken in. Isileli Pulu remains in prison charged with sedition and being a party to murder. He allegedly was caught on video in the midst of the riot pointing toward the King's Shoreline building. The bodies of seven rioters,

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apparently trapped in flames, later were found there. The most famous pro-democracy MP, Akilisi Pohiva, was taken in just minutes before he was scheduled to meet with the Ambassador on Jan. 17. Pohiva has since been released on bail after being charged with three counts of sedition. The Ambassador was able to meet with Clive Edwards, another pro-democracy MP, who is convinced he will be detained, too. Edwards flatly denies engaging in any criminal planning or act, but he believes authorities are so angry about the riot that they will pursue all who had a role in organizing the political demonstration from which the riot exploded.

Political reforms, Parliament, and Pressure

¶6. (C) Per reftels, the atmosphere on Nov. 16 was highly charged. A National Committee for Political Reform had submitted a report recommending an all-elected Parliament, a significant change from Tonga's current model that is dominated by the King's appointed cabinet and a group of nine elected Nobles. Prime Minister Sevele tossed in a counter proposal that would have retained for the King the possibility of appointing enough MPs to join with Nobles to retain a majority in Parliament. Pohiva and his pro-democracy colleagues, who had been relatively satisfied with the NCPR report, then offered up their own counter proposal. The pro-democracy MPs insisted that Parliament take a vote on the way forward before adjourning for the year. They orchestrated large and vocal demonstrations outside Parliament for several days.

¶7. (C) Prime Minister Sevele, the Nobles, and most of Cabinet were wary of the crowds and wanted to defer decision-making to a calmer negotiating environment. Sevele had proposed a few days before to have Parliament approve the NCPR report "in principle," and then create a nine-person committee (3 pro-democracy MPs; 3 Nobles; 3 from Cabinet) to consider options and provide a solution when Parliament reconvenes in May. Pohiva reportedly agreed, though he later could not win support from his colleagues. The Speaker declined to convene a Parliament session Nov. 16, the last feasible day for a vote, citing the threatening tone of the demonstrations just

across the street. Instead, Sevele called a mini-Cabinet meeting in his office for mid-afternoon and invited some pro-democracy MPs.

Politics, media, business motives

18. (C) In the meantime, the crowd at Pangai Si'i park just across from Parliament and next to the PM's offices was angry. Most of the several thousand demonstrators were there to support pro-democracy, anti-monarchy themes; but another, smaller group was vocal in its opposition to change. The groups exchanged insults, ramping up tension. Pro-democracy leaders, including Pohiva, gave fiery political speeches. Some in the pro-democracy group had additional agendas.

-- The Government reportedly had cut off power to a pro-democracy TV station, OBN, just a day or two before Nov. 16. OBN had been providing a near-constant forum for Pohiva and pro-democracy leaders, in contrast to the Government's Tonga TV that had reportedly given very little coverage to the pro-democracy movement but had accented the Government's stance. The official reason for cutting off OBN was that the managers had no license to broadcast and no right to the land on which the station was built. The facts are complicated and relate back to the late King, who had "given" the land without paperwork to an American religious broadcaster who had a license. The American later transferred his rights to OBN's current religious-based team. The issues were in litigation and had not been resolved as of the power cut. We hear a group of OBN supporters were among those who marched to Pangai Si'i Nov. 16.

-- Also, one of PM Sevele's pet projects was a clean-up of Tonga customs. He appointed a committee that recommended shutting down all bonded warehouses to be replaced by one or two new bonded warehouses. A small-business group strongly objected, alleging that members of the PM's committee were planning to control the new warehouse businesses, a shift of graft, not a clean-up. The small-business group also was very irritated by a major influx of ethnic-Chinese retail shops in Nuku'alofa. The small-business group is alleged to have trucked in young men from rural areas, primed them with alcohol, and aimed them toward destruction. Some witnesses allege molotov cocktails were at the ready.

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Mini-Cabinet meeting under pressure

19. (C) Accounts differ on just what spark set off the riot and whether that spark was lit before or after the PM's mini-Cabinet meeting began. Pro-democracy leaders say they went to Sevele's office in good faith and asked in reasonable tones for a written decision supporting a fully elected Parliament. With that, they said they would do their best to calm the volatile crowd outside. Government participants describe Pohiva as shouting demands in "or else" terms. The initial response was inaction. In fact, Edwards said, the AG spent a crucial half hour or more loudly praying for divine guidance (not an unusual occurrence in Tonga). Eventually, the pro-democracy leaders departed, only to be begged back at the office gate by the PM's advisor Senitule.

Victory? Too late

10. (C) By that time, the crowd outside the PM's office building was casting stones, breaking windows, and seemingly losing control. By some accounts, Pohiva tried to calm the nearest members of the throng from stoning Senitule before the two re-entered the building to receive a statement, signed by Sevele, agreeing to a fully elected Parliament for the 2008 elections. (Sevele since has noted that the statement was made under duress and in any case would need formal approval of Parliament and the King to be valid.) With the written statement in hand, Pohiva, Edwards, Pulu, and others returned to the crowd, gained access to the media,

declared "We have won," and pleaded with the crowd to go home since their objective had been achieved.

A riot in phases

¶11. (C) However, by then, the riot was in full gear. Initially, demonstrators stoned government offices near the park, breaking windows, including at the PM's office and the Treasury. Then a group of 500 or so rioters headed for the business district. Several eye-witnesses say the riot built in stages. Initially, there appeared to be simultaneous, perhaps planned attacks to trash targeted, politically relevant businesses: the PM's grocery store; the King's Shoreline building; the Princess's duty-free store; the King's Indian cronies' hotel. Rioters snatched alcohol from shops, becoming more unruly. Some rioters then started setting fires to the targeted buildings they had earlier trashed, beginning with Shoreline. With that, hundreds of people who had merely been avid spectators began stealing everything not nailed down. Some rioters turned their attention to small shops owned by ethnic-Chinese. As the day was windy and dry, flames quickly devastated most of the CBD.

Instigators? Pro-democracy personal ambition?

¶12. (C) The PM and AG are convinced the pro-democracy MPs must bear the blame. At the least, they fired up the mob with incendiary political rhetoric. Allegedly they plotted destruction. Asked what possible advantage the pro-democracy movement could perceive from devastating Nuku'alofa, the PM suggested the intent was to convince the King to remove the Sevele Government for horribly misjudging the public mood and to install a true pro-democracy PM, in effect to engineer a coup. People's Rep. Edwards scoffed at that suggestion, saying if activists had intended a coup, they would have carefully designed one. Another, related theory is that Pohiva and other long-time pro-democracy leaders deeply resented the King's selection of Sevele, a pro-democracy activist with lesser and shorter credentials, to be the first modern-day "commoner" PM. Thus, the argument goes, crassly personal political ambition was the driving force. A long-time pro-democracy activist said he and Sevele had opted to take a different path from Pohiva's "socialist agenda." Some argue that Sevele's proposal for people's reps to be elected from single-member rather than island-wide districts triggered political angst, particularly among the Tonga'tapu people's reps. Single-member districts would leave Nuku'alofa with only one constituency; but all three current Tonga'tapu people's reps, plus Sevele, reside in the capital.

Small business grudges?

¶13. (C) Another theory for the riot is that the small-business activists, incensed about the bonded warehouse scam, infiltrated criminal thugs and young toughs into the

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crowd, and then activated them to target enemy businesses for destruction. People point to the burning of a Jones Co. store well outside the CBD as particularly relevant evidence.

Mr. Jones is one of the members of PM Sevele's committee who allegedly was to profit from the new bonded-warehouse arrangement. A number of stores torched in the CBD, and particularly the Chinese shops, could also fit this theory. A prominent businesswoman who was recently arrested on riot charges is an active member of the small-business organization.

A modest plan that exploded?

¶14. (C) A cabinet minister suggested that Pohiva's effort to force a vote in Parliament on political reforms was illuminating. The theory goes that Pohiva had to know the People's Reps would lose any vote, as usual, since Cabinet and Nobles combined have an overwhelming majority. Thus, the presumed aim was to trigger mob action in the streets. Some

witnesses say pro-democracy speakers in the lead-up to the riot publicly counted down the days to the 16th. Perhaps Pohiva was pessimistically recalling a past instance when a land commission, set up with fanfare, consulted widely and put forth proposals, only to be ignored. Perhaps angry radicals who burned a few cars and an abandoned royal residence in a rural area during political tensions in August-September 2005 were intending to take out frustration on political opponents, the PM and royal family, for the history of such failed expectations. Activists might have intended another modest demonstration of public frustration, a few trashed buildings to catch the elite's attention, not anticipating that a boozed-up mob, access to a petrol station, and high winds would whip up a conflagration.

Counter theories: blame the PM?

¶15. (C) Two prominent members of the NCPR have publicly blamed PM Sevele for precipitating the crisis. Ref D reported on the view of Sitiveni Halapua, head of the Pacific Island Development Program (PIDP) in Honolulu and chief drafter of the NCPR report. Halapua placed major blame on Sevele for putting forward his own reform proposal that unnecessarily created confusion in the reform process, moving discussion from Parliament to Cabinet thereby raising alarms in the streets, and failing to have adequate security plans in place. Ana Taufe'ulungaki, a University of the South Pacific academic and NCPR member, was similarly critical of Sevele's role in an analysis she wrote just after the riot.

Blame the King and/or Cabinet?

¶16. (C) Ever since the Palace (the then-Crown Prince via the late King) appointed Sevele the first modern-era "commoner" PM, Sevele has said the Palace accepts the need for political reform. Our own past conversations with now-King George V suggest the monarch will gladly cede much power to Parliament, though he wants to ensure he can continue to have decisive influence on at least some important issues. Sevele has not admitted it, but it is certainly possible that the King and PM were in league to permit meaningful reform, by Tonga standards, but to ensure retention of royal prerogatives. Also, most members of the current Cabinet were appointed to their positions. It was only in the past two years, in a reform move, that the King appointed two people's reps and two Nobles from Parliament into Cabinet. Most of the un-elected Cabinet members reportedly see no future for themselves in an all-elected Parliament. Some may not mind returning to private lives; others may have encouraged the Palace and PM to propose adjustments to the NCPR recommendations to retain sufficient appointed members of Parliament to form a majority with the Nobles reps.

Blame the police?

¶17. (C) By nearly all accounts, the Tonga Police Force did a poor job of attempting to control a volatile situation in mid-November. We hear Sevele believes some in senior police positions were actively colluding with pro-democracy leaders in the lead-up to the riot. Police were present on Nov. 16. They attempted to separate competing crowds and to be a buffer between the crowds and public buildings; however, once the riot exploded, the police were totally overwhelmed. We hear Australian and New Zealand police who arrived in following days believe Tonga police judged rightly that attempting, unarmed, to stop the rioting would have been

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nonsensical.

Praise the TDS?

¶18. (C) Two factors brought the situation under control. First, after nightfall, rioters became exhausted, too drunk or too burdened with looted items to continue. Second, PM Sevele called the armed TDS into the streets. We are told

that the TDS was a decisive element on Nov. 17 and 18 when some elements attempted to resume destructive acts, including by using heavy construction equipment to shield their movements. TDS soldiers cocked their weapons and reportedly fired into the air, causing the potential rioters to retreat. The TDS also set up armed check points that controlled traffic and subdued any potential crowds. Perhaps inevitably when a military force trained for warfare is called on to do policing, some reports of arbitrary or unnecessary use of force have surfaced. In general, though, most sources were reasonably complimentary of TDS performance at a troubled time.

Comment

¶19. (C) PM Sevele's management of the reform process undoubtedly raised alarms in the pro-democracy movement. Sevele's reform counter-proposal and his shift of venue from Parliament to Cabinet were surely intended to slow the pace of electoral reform and to engineer a result that, in line with Tonga tradition, would allow the King, if he so wishes, to retain a majority coalition in Parliament via his own Cabinet appointments plus the votes of the Nobles. That outcome would frustrate the pro-democracy movement's goal to ensure, via an all-elected Parliament with an absolute majority of people's reps, that the King could no longer dominate Tonga politics. Those stakes are important politically, so it is no surprise that the democracy movement energized people-power pressure.

¶20. (C) It strikes us that none of the supposed instigators of the riot could have intended the full scope of what took place. Certainly, some pro-democracy activists might have wanted to vividly illustrate public outrage at perceived efforts by Palace and PM to manipulate reform. They might have judged that trashing a few politically targeted businesses was one more useful exercise of pressure. Certainly, the small business activists may have seen an opportunity to strike back at larger opponents. It is possible, though it strikes us as unlikely, that the pro-democracy leadership somehow believed street violence could split the King from the PM and bring about a "coup." It seems clear Sevele did misjudge the political atmosphere and how much room he had to maneuver for his preferred pace and degree of reform. In the end, Mother Nature's winds turned a nasty, targeted riot, into a major political, economic, and cultural disaster for Tonga.

¶21. (C) It appears all players deserve some blame. Inevitably, and understandably, much attention in the two months since the riot has been focused on finding and prosecuting perpetrators. With that process proceeding, significant attention also must focus forward, on rebuilding economic infrastructure, re-energizing political reform, and finding ways to promote reconciliation. Septel discusses the way ahead.
DINGER